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Editorial

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This issue contains the four keynote papers addressing the theme of "Conversions and Transformations: Missiological Approaches to Religious Change" that were given at the 14th Assembly of the International Association for Mission Studies (IAMS) in Seoul, South Korea on 11-17 August 2016. In the first, Christine Lienemann-Perrin takes a polycentric historical overview of some ways in which Christian understanding of conversion has changed in different periods and in different religio-political landscapes. In the early centuries, she argues, Christian conversion meant adopting a third way that "avoided both comprehensive assimilation to the Jewish path and total adaptation to the religious ways of Hellenism". Under Muslim rule in the East, change of religious adherence was permitted only from Christianity to Islam. In the latter context, the survival of Christian communities depended on adopting clear-cut faith boundaries such as Islam professed. In the post-Reformation West, and as Christianity was spread across empires, Christian belonging, or membership of a particular denomination, was often imposed according to the religion of the ruler. In China, in place of either-or belonging, Jesuit missions raised the possibility of practicing Christianity as "an *extension* of one's own religiosity or religious identity". More recently in Africa, the emergence of indigenous forms of Christianity has encouraged religious mobility and even plural religious belonging. Finally, Lienemann-Perrin argues that in the secularized European societies three trends have emerged: unchurchliness (*Entkirchlichung*), which seeks a de-

conversion; re-Christianization, which encourages revival and return to faith; and unbound religiosity, or a diffuse understanding of religion that does not require conversion.

The second article by Joel Robbins gives the example of the conversion to Christianity of the Urapmin people in Papua New Guinea from the 1970s. This situation of this group apparently choosing to adopt Christianity would seem to be another model to add to the range of understandings of conversion given by Lienemann-Perrin. However, Robbins's anthropological research on the resulting changes in Urapmin culture adds another dimension to the understanding of Christian conversion. It leads him to make a significant general observation that Christianity has a "duplex" character in that it does not jettison previous traditions but encourages converts to evaluate their culture critically in relation to the new Christian values. In dialogue with other sociological literature on conversion, Robbins finds that the persistence of some cultural practices is not a reason to conclude that Urapmin have a syncretistic faith that mixes one tradition with another. Rather, they do identify as Christians and strive to live according to Christian values, but this is an ongoing struggle. In other words, the critical or secondary relation of Christianity to culture means that conversion may initiate not only remarkably rapid cultural change such as seen among the Urapmin at first but also a longer term process of cultural criticism.

The historical and anthropological approaches of Lienemann-Perrin and Robbins observe Christian conversion from an external perspective. The third and fourth plenary papers consider from within the conversion and transformation of the church itself which is arguably the primary biblical reference of conversion following the prophetic tradition. Elsa Tamez examines the Letter of James, which she regards as written to migrant churches and in the context of inequality. She believes the resonance with the contemporary context of

globalization calls the contemporary church similarly to a true change in mentality, attitude and practices. This, she argues, must take place through a re-reading of the Bible and rethinking of tradition, rejection of greed and resistance to consumerism, renewed integrity, and continued hope in the face of hegemonic and economic powers; in other words, a return to the values of Jesus himself. Both the Letter of James itself and its application by Tamez could be regarded as examples of the kind of ongoing cultural criticism that Robbins observes is in the nature of Christianity.

Hyung Keun Choi gives a further example of Christian self-criticism – this time of the Korean Protestant churches and their theology of mission. This is prompted by what he sees as a crucial juncture as the churches face widespread allegations from wider society along with numerical decline that suggests internal dissatisfaction. The Korean Church has displayed a strong theology of conversion which encouraged people to reject their traditions and also produced a strongly proselytizing world missionary movement. But Choi complains that it reduced the gospel of conversion and salvation to a "privatized eschatology" and argues that what is now called for is a conversion of the church itself in which it rediscovers that its nature and calling is to participate in the mission of God (*missio Dei*). The transformation of the churches from institutions preoccupied with their buildings and growth into missional churches in respect of their worship, community life and discipleship will, Choi believes, result in a holistic mission in which the faith is lived out as a "public gospel". Choi's criticism of the Korean Protestantism of which he is a part not only illustrates the ongoing struggle of conversion as observed by Robbins, it can also be regarded as bearing out Lienemann-Perrin's thesis that understandings of conversion are shaped by religio-political context. The understanding of conversion as a radical severing of ties to tradition and a commitment to church growth sat well within the context of industrialization and

modernization in Korea. But now that South Korea has, in many respects, transitioned to what is sometimes called "post-modernity", such an understanding jars with contemporary Korean culture and leaves Christianity out of step with prevailing norms.

The fifth paper in this issue was not a conference plenary paper, and it does not directly address conversion, but it does deal with theology of religions – a discipline that has particularly highlighted the challenges to mission and evangelism of the understanding of conversion as from one religion to another. Kjøde identifies a divergence in theology of religions in evangelical and ecumenical statements on mission since 1989: While evangelicals have consistently through to the *Cape Town Commitment* (CTC, 2011) emphasized proclamation, truth and uniqueness of Christ, the World Council of Churches (WCC) *Together towards Life* (TTL, 2013) takes an inclusivist approach to other faiths that "opens" toward religious pluralism in the sense coined by Alan Race and John Hick. Kjøde's paper draws attention to a subject that is at the heart of a theological understanding of religious change that is not discussed in any of the conference plenary papers: salvation. The pluralists argued that all religions were vehicles of salvation and this seemed to obviate the need for conversion from one to another. However, since TTL is a statement on Christian mission and evangelism, it would seem that the difference between it and the CTC is more about the meaning of Christian salvation and how it relates to the work of Christ than about whether or not it is available through other faiths. At any rate, it is a reminder that the understanding of conversion, and of the transformations it brings about, is closely related to how Christians interpret the call to mission, evangelization and evangelism, and therefore a central concern of mission studies.

In the next issue we look forward to a further selection of the unsolicited articles that have been peer-reviewed for the journal. Many of the peer reviewers are also on the editorial board or among the contributing editors of *Mission Studies*. The list of editors at the front of the journal has been updated for this issue to take account of changes made at the 2016 IAMS Assembly.